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SUBJECT: ARMENIANS IN CYPRUS: FITTING IN BEATS FALLING OUT

REF: A. NICOSIA 111

[1](#)B. NICOSIA 52

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: Successful for four hundred years in maintaining their unique culture, language and religion, Cyprus's Armenians -- who enjoy "official religious group" status under the Republic's 1960 convention -- nonetheless seek closer ties to the majority Greek Cypriot population. As such, Armenian Cypriots would willingly accept conscription into the Greek Cypriot National Guard, claims community leader Vartkes Mahdessian, "provided that certain conditions are met." Mahdessian, a non-voting Member of Parliament, also has urged his flock to master the Greek language and become active in mainstream G/C politics in hopes of bettering their lot. RoC census data reveal that Armenian Cypriots in the government-controlled area number approximately 3,000. The true figure is higher, Mahdessian believes, owing to recent immigration from Armenia proper. Natives and newcomers have not mixed well, threatening community unity short-term. Political parties of the right traditionally could count on the community's votes, but a mixed-blood Armenian's success within DIKO and Communist AKEL's lobbying of the immigrant population has brought the group toward the center. Armenian Cypriots support the concept of a bi-communal, bi-zonal re-unified Cyprus, Mahdessian confirmed, but are leery of living amidst Turkish Cypriots, a product of historic animosity between "mother countries" Turkey and Armenia. END SUMMARY.

Long a Tile in the Cypriot Mosaic

[1](#)2. Armenians began arriving on Cyprus in the early 1600s, revealed Mahdessian in a January 25 meeting with Poloffs. Attracted by commercial opportunities, itinerant tradesmen established a presence in the island's then-largest cities, Nicosia, Famagusta, and Larnaca. Historically urban unlike the agrarian Maronites (Ref B), Armenians were dispersed throughout the island prior to the 1974 conflict; all crossed south in the population exchanges that followed. Official RoC census data report their population totals 3,000.

[1](#)3. The actual figure was higher, Mahdessian asserted, although by what factor was anyone's guess. The last 15 years had witnessed a wave of immigrants, ethnic cousins fleeing economic hardship in Armenia proper or other parts of the former Soviet Union. Many had settled in rapidly emptying Cypriot villages in the hinterlands, taking agricultural jobs no Cypriot would touch. Some attended church services in the towns and had integrated into the native Armenian Cypriot community, but others, mostly illegal, remained cloistered. His community was thus divided, Mahdessian fretted.

14. Four hundred years living amidst the Greek- and Turkish Cypriot communities had not robbed the Armenian Cypriots of their identity, he continued. Most considered Armenian the mother tongue, and, despite intermarriage, frequented Armenian churches primarily. The RoC funded separate elementary schools for Armenian children, a welcome gesture, believed Mahdessian. Finally, they retained their historic flair for commerce, as members of his community had excelled in businesses both large and small in Cyprus.

Inter-communal Relations Good, Not Perfect

15. In general, Armenian and Greek Cypriots coexisted peacefully and related well, Mahdessian thought. Nonetheless, discrimination did occur. During the race for the DIKO party presidency, for example, unknowns, perhaps supporters of rival Nikos Kleanthous, planted rumors that half-Armenian candidate Marios Karoyian was less sympathetic to the national cause. Karoyian's clear victory was proof, Mahdessian asserted, that most G/Cs thought favorably of their Armenian compatriots. Others, however, criticized his group for seeking government assistance not available to the mainstream. "They cite the fact that in 1960 we chose to align ourselves with the Greek Cypriot side. What were we supposed to do?" he wondered, "Side with the Turks? With our history?"

16. From his perch as community leader, Mahdessian sought not only to preserve his community's separateness, but also to strengthen its economic well-being. To succeed it was vital that Armenians interact with Greek Cypriot society. So, while many Armenians attended ethnic elementary schools and

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international high schools, he encouraged Armenian students to study Greek on "the native track," not as a foreign language. With pride he described how his efforts had won changes to the curriculum for Armenian Cypriot students at the English School, one of Nicosia's toniest.

17. Armenian Cypriot parents of means had turned to the English School and others due to the 2004 decision to shutter the Melkonian Armenian School. Once a source of pride that helped forge a shared identity, Melkonian's closure had shaken his community, Mahdessian lamented. He thought poor management, not weak demand, had forced the shut-down. As private schools were big business in Cyprus, with parents willing to spend upwards of \$10,000 per year, Melkonian might have survived, Mahdessian argued, had it offered a "two-track" curriculum for Armenian and non-Armenian students. He did not hide his hopes that someday the school might re-open (Note: Media February 4 reported that Cyprus's Supreme Court had dealt a blow to Mahdessian's hopes by overturning an earlier RoC decision to preserve the property on historic grounds, thus paving the way for the site's eventual redevelopment. End Note.)

Conscription Opt-Out Soon to End

18. In recent years, the Greek Cypriot National Guard has faced difficulty filling its conscript billets. One element of the GCNG plan to meet staffing gaps lay in ending the exemption from compulsory military service that Cyprus's recognized religious groups enjoy (Ref A). Armenian Cypriots benefited greatly from the security the state provided, Mahdessian admitted, and their youth would serve if called. "Military service might even improve our standing in the community. We're not against it, per se," he reasoned. But the discrimination Armenian Cypriots had endured in 1992-94 -- the only time community members had been drafted -- showed that an altered GCNG conscription regime was imperative.

Mahdessian was drafting a letter to RoC President Tassos Papadopoulos that highlighted his community's concerns and offered suggestions on how Armenian Cypriots might better serve in the National Guard.

¶9. Topping his list was the recommendation that Armenians first enter service in 2008, not 2007, allowing those youth who already had finalized plans for work or university to continue. Mahdessian hoped their conscripts might attend basic training as a group, reducing the odds of being singled out for mistreatment on account of ethnicity. Armenian-descent draftees ought serve in big cities to allow them to practice their religion, since the community had no facilities in rural, remote areas. Finally, Mahdessian thought Armenian Cypriot officer candidates would lose ground because due to weakness in written Greek; he would urge the government to weigh language/communication test scores with this in mind. He hoped Papadopoulos would respond favorably to the missive, but seemed resigned to the opposite outcome.

Recent Arrivals Change Community's Dynamic

¶10. Despite their contributions to the Republic's economy, filling menial jobs unacceptable to Cypriots, recent arrivals from Armenia proper rarely slept soundly, Mahdessian contended. "(Minister of Interior Neoklis) Sylikiotis is after them all," he continued, "as if they were Pontians, Sri Lankans or Filipinos." Acknowledging that most recently-arrived Armenians were illegal, like members of the aforementioned groups, Mahdessian nonetheless argued their shared bloodlines with an official religious minority group made their cases special. "We're going to work on this with the Ministry," he pledged.

¶11. The presence of the Armenian migrants was changing politics within his community, Mahdessian contended. Armenian Cypriots traditionally had tilted right, supporting Democratic Rally (DISY) candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections; Communist AKEL, Cyprus's largest party, enjoyed little support. AKEL was making inroads, however, deploying its numerous Russian speakers to recruit the newcomers, many of whom grew up in the FSU. Were they to gain legal status and eventually naturalize, they could greatly alter voting patterns, Mahdessian believe.

¶12. Another factor bringing Armenian Cypriots to the political center was Marios Karoyian's political success, a source of pride within the community. DIKO was President

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Papadopoulos's party, he noted, and no Armenian Cypriot before had reached such political heights. Mahdessian hoped younger community members would follow Karoyian's path and seek leadership positions in mainstream Greek Cypriot parties. He estimated the current Armenian Cypriot voter breakdown at 40 percent DISY, 40 percent DIKO, 10 percent AKEL, and 10 percent split between Cyprus's smaller parties.

¶13. Despite voting "no" on the 2004 Annan Plan referendum -- at a rate below the Greek Cypriots' 67 percent -- the community generally favored a bi-zonal, bi-communal model for a re-unified Cyprus, Mahdessian reported. Armenian Cypriots seemed in no hurry to live side by side with T/Cs, however. "Many Armenians went north after the checkpoints opened in 2003, but the novelty soon wore off," he claimed. Perhaps due to historic animosity between the mother countries, his constituents felt uncomfortable in the Turkish Cypriot-controlled areas and now rarely visited.

Looking Forward

¶14. COMMENT: While half the size of the Maronite community

(Ref B), the Armenian minority has better prospects for survival in Cyprus. Helping their cause is the absence of enclaved north of the Buffer Zone. With four villages deep in the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" and thus vulnerable to T/C or Turkish aggression, Maronites sometimes stake wishy-washy positions anathema to the Greek Cypriot majority; Armenians hold no such divisions of loyalty. Immigration from Armenia has buoyed their numbers and provided needed new blood, friction with the old guard notwithstanding. Marios Karoyian's success has brought visibility to the community and pride to its members. The "enemy of my enemy" factor also contributes -- Greek Cypriots commiserate and empathize with Armenians, as both feel victimized by Ankara. Finally, community leaders here, like their counterparts in Lebanon and Syria, have adopted a pragmatic approach to surviving alongside the majority group, evidenced lately by Mahdessian's decision on military service. END COMMENT.
SCHLICHER